

CSCE NEWS RELEASE

Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe

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Helsinki Commission urges Russia's Duma to reject proposed Restrictions on Religion

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Washington, DC—The Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe today sent messages to the leaders of Russia's Duma urging them to defeat proposed legislation that they claim would discriminate against particular religious denominations and be in violation of several international agreements to which the Russian Federation is a signatory. In a two-hour, closed session from which journalists and the public were excluded, the Duma's Committee on Religious Affairs approved this past week legislation that would supplant much of Russia's 1990 Law on Freedom of Conscience. A vote by the full Duma is expected June 18.

"Russia's present national legislation on religious freedom permits all persons in Russia to worship according to their conscience and is in compliance with international agreements such as the Helsinki Accords," said Commission Chairman Senator Alfonse D'Amato (R-C-NY). "We hope that our colleagues in both the Russian Duma and the Federation Council will not create new laws that violate these agreements, or discriminate against law-abiding Russian citizens and foreign visitors. We urge them to reject any discriminatory legislation."

Commission Co-Chairman Christopher H. Smith (R-NJ) pointed out, "For some time now we have noticed Russian localities enacting legislation that is clearly out of step with the international norms for religious liberty. If this proposed national legislation passes, it may presage the curtailment of religious freedom throughout Russia."

According to the Keston News Service in Moscow, controversial elements of the legislation in-

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The Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe by law monitors and encourages progress in implementing the provisions of the Helsinki Accords. The Commission, created in 1976, is made up of nine Senators, nine Representatives and one official each from the Departments of State, Commerce and Defense. For more information about the Commission, please call (202) 225-1901.

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clude: a preamble which places Orthodoxy above Islam, Judaism and Buddhism, and these four religions above all others; provisions denying for a 15-year period legal status to “new” religious groups; a commission of “state experts” to review the doctrines and practices of groups applying for registration; and, a requirement that a religious group produce 100,000 signatures in order to receive ‘all-Russian’ status.

Like many countries in eastern and central Europe since the fall of communism, Russia has experienced not only a revival of religious practice, but also an inflow of unfamiliar or “exotic” faiths. Leaders of the Russian Orthodox Church and Russian nationalist legislators have been especially critical of this new trend and have demanded legislation to limit the activities and influence of “new” faiths. However, many religious groups unfamiliar to the average Russian have existed in the Soviet Union and Russian Empire for decades.